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### State must preserve farmland

Sunday will be more than just the first day of spring. It's also National Ag Day, and marks the beginning of National Ag Week which continues through next Saturday.

The events are held annually to increase public awareness of the significance of U.S. agriculture, not only in the national economy, but also in the world. Certainly at the heart of America's success is the affordable abundance of everyday necessities, including food, fiber and clothing. National Ag Day is an occasion for honoring those who work so hard to help ensure that our basic needs are met.

As the world population continues to soar, the demand for food and fiber also increases, and with many Third World countries unable to adequately provide for themselves, they look to U.S. agriculture to fill a vital role. And in providing food and fiber for others, American agriculture - and indeed, the U.S. economy - benefits as well.

Many of us take agriculture for granted. We shouldn't, because without a strong agricultural base, life as we know it today most likely would be considerably different and much less enjoyable. But thanks to modern agriculture, Americans are indeed blessed. Six weeks ago, on Feb. 7, we celebrated Food Check-Out Day, the date by which the average American had earned enough money to pay their food bill for the entire year. Tax Freedom Day, when we'll have earned enough to pay our federal, state and local taxes for the year, won't roll around until almost the middle of April. Moreover, while the average American allocates only 10 percent of their disposable income for food, our cousins in Great Britain spend 11 percent; people in Australia and France, 14 percent; those in Italy, Germany and Japan, 17 percent; Mexico, 24 percent, and India, 51 percent.

We are indeed fortunate to live in the United States and owe this country's farmers our heartiest thanks for the outstanding job they do each year. Thanks to modern technology, they are able to do it even as their numbers continue to dwindle. But the nation's number of farms and farmers cannot continue to decline forever without grave consequences.

The latest ag statistics place Kentucky fourth in the nation in terms of farm numbers, with 85,000. At first blush, that's impressive, and only Texas, Iowa and Missouri ranked ahead of us. However, of our 85,000 farms, 54,500 had sales of only \$1,000-9,999. Another 24,800 reported sales of \$10,000-99,999, and only 5,700

Kentucky farms had sales of \$100,000 or more, the amount considered necessary to keep a farm family of four above the federal poverty level of \$18,400.

At the same time, the number of farms in Kentucky continues to decline, with last year's total down by 2,000 from the previous year and well below the 91,198 reported in 1997. And as long as land continues to be taken for industrial, residential and commercial development, Kentucky's number of farms will continue to decline. That should concern all of us, because while we need industrial and commercial jobs, and homes in which to live, we must find a way to preserve our best agricultural for agricultural purposes. The future well-being of all of us depends on it.

We salute our farmers and all who work in agribusiness professions for their efforts to make provide us with an abundance of safe and affordable products. But we'll do them a grave injustice if we permit National Ag Day and National Ag Week to pass without committing ourselves to work with them to find ways to conserve farm land, and in the process, ensure it will be here to serve future generations as it has served us. Let us not fail them!

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